In the Claims

Cancel claims 1 to 7 and substitute therefor

8.(new) A system for processing ~~drilling fluid during~~ top-hole drilling in underwater drilling operations comprising

a sealing device for mounting on a template of drilling hole in sealed relation to the surroundings to prevent leakage of drilling fluid from the drilling hole;

a floating drilling vessel having at least one of a treatment plant for treating drilling fluid and a storage installation to receive drilling fluid;

at least one pump module spaced from and connected to said sealing device to effect a differential pressure therein for pumping drilling fluid from said sealing device upwardly to said at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on said vessel; and

a line extending from said pump module upwardly to said at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on said vessel to convey the drilling fluid from said pump module to said at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on said vessel.

9.(new) A system as set forth in claim 8 wherein said sealing device and said pump module are interconnected to for a suction and centralization module.

10.(new) A system as set forth in claim 8 further comprising a submerged electric motor operatively connected to said pump to drive said pump.

11.(new) A system as set forth in claim 8 wherein said pump generates an outlet pressure dependent on the ocean depth and weight of the drilling fluid sufficient to transport the drilling fluid to said drilling vessel.

12.(new) A method of processing drilling fluid from a drilling hole in an ocean bed during top-hole drilling before a BOP is installed and a riser connected between the BOP and a drilling vessel, said method comprising the steps of

mounting a sealing device in sealed relation to the surroundings on a template of the drilling hole;

mounting at least one pump module in spaced relation to and connected to said sealing device to effect a differential pressure therein;

providing an outlet pressure for the drilling fluid based on said differential pressure and the specic weight of mud to be transported and the ocean depth; and

pumping drilling fluid from the sealing device into a line extending upwardly to at least one of a treatment plant and a storage installation on a floating drilling vessel.

13.(new) A method as set forth in claim 12 which further comprises the step of returning the drilling fluid from the drilling vessel into the drilling hole.

14.(new) A method as set forth in claim 12 which further comprises the step of directing the drilling fluid from the drilling vessel into the ocean bed in spaced relation to the drilling hole to form a further drilling hole.